183
181 The Bambara has a very highly developed sense of this idea of justice and there is nothing he resents more than injustice or a denial of justice. His resentment is stubborn and his vengeance, which may be deferred under a show of indifference, is implacable. The chronicle of Ségou is rich in pertinent examples. There was Ngolo Dyara, bringing murder and disaster on his own relatives in order to satisfy his hatred for having been sold into slavery by his uncle and not ransomed by any of his relatives. There was Kégné Mari who, watching the murder of Touro-koro in the Komo wood, expressed his vengeance finally fulfilled by saying: "Remember how, falsely accusing me of adultery with one of your wives, you had me lashed? And how on that day I told you that even though I were lying on the ground, if I could touch you with my foot, I would lay you low? Here at last is the day of my vengeance!" Similar examples are innumerable.

If he is powerless against injustice, the Bambara will wait patiently and, each time he has to speak, will dissimulate his weakness in formulas which have a double meaning, such as
[195] O do!, meaning "That's it!" O nya-na, meaning "Oh well!" Tigi!, meaning "That's true"; and other similar expressions. At the same time, he is repeating to himself his proverb: don' m'i fantan', a bla k'a teme, meaning "Don't pay attention while you are weak," that is, "Wait until I am strong enough to take vengeance (lit., to pay you back)."

181 This instinctive feeling for justice accounts, in a certain measure, for the family bonds made up of reciprocal rights [131]
571 and duties between parents and between them and their children
626 and, by an analogy of which we shall see other examples, between master and slave and between chief and subject. The obligation to respect all pacts concluded in the form of vows, oaths or fraternal alliance rests on the same basis. And it is the same notion that inspires the repression of acts which are almost universally condemned: perjury, treason, false witness, slander,
[691] theft and murder. It sustains the tireless persistence of the pleader who will go through endless lawsuits to obtain redress for a wrong done to him or to one of his people. And it gives strength to public vengeance against the sorcerer.

692 In matters of justice, the Bambara frequently continue to consult their old tribal judges. It must be noted, however, that in taking away the judicial competence of the old chiefs, the French administration has contributed to diminishing, and almost to completely destroying, their power.

The Bambara had a judicial organization quite as precise and regulated as their religious organization, although there was no codified law, such as the Koran or the Hebrew tables of law. Justice was rendered according to rules which each community passed on from generation to generation. These rules are not of divine origin, but they [69] are sacred nevertheless, for custom is the legacy of the ancestors. The Fama and his council of notables could promulgate new laws, but, before deciding on a new rule, they consult the Komo and the Nyama [an altar]. Then, in the presence of a priest, each one swears on the altar to obey the law which becomes sacred. Moreover, the customary rules cannot be separated from the moral code and the religion to which they are linked. They are not uniform; each canton has its own, and often each village, and within each of these there are observances peculiar to certain families or to certain castes. Nevertheless, the sentiment of fair play is very strong among the Blacks, but they do not admit the equality of men, who are naturally different one from another according to their aptitudes, means, and condition.

Custom regulates all relations between individuals and between individuals and the collectivity.

692 Two sorts of native tribunals existed in the Bambara country: a tribunal of conciliation, presided over by the village chief, who assembled a council of notables; and a high tribunal presided over by the Fama, to whom were submitted the matters which the first tribunal had been unable to settle. In addition, the Fama could call before his tribunal the civil or penal matters which seemed to him to be of importance to the public order.

695 643 Justice was without charge and rendered day and night by the Fama as one of his essential functions, for the judge is the one who repairs the disorders that shake society. The hearings were solemnly conducted and took place under the silk-cotton tree (Ceiba pentandra)

545 Example:
794 Tiekoroba kolili (the old man who has nothing)
522 Ita rokina momindi (what you say is not liked)
Ida konieti aie (you are right)
N'ka idia dopina marmandi (but one doesn't like what you say)
Or again:
Demise fentili (the rich young man)
Ida dokma kakadi (one likes what you say)
Ida konie tinaie (what you say is not true)
N'ka idia dokma makadi (but one likes what you say)

545 The Kworéduga have the su (Moor) as taboo, and they accom-
534 pany themselves in singing with a sacred gourd, yaraba, which con-
794 tains seeds of Lufa cilindrica.

Finally, during the circumcision initiation period for example,
535 the child learns the sacred dances which often mime exploits of the
881 mythical ancestors.

A certain evolution characterizes the native art which has
177 been transformed in a curious fashion by contact with Europeans.
517 In European centers, prolonged contact with the Whites has confused the beliefs that inspired the art, but the artists have lost neither their taste nor their gifts. At the request of the Whites themselves, they have undertaken a controlled art, with the aim of pleasing the Europeans. Needless to say, even if it conserves some charm in its form, all this new art, which evolves with the same swift rhythm as our modes, remains terribly dead, for the true source of inspiration has dried up. This art no longer seeks to be true, but to be pretty; by this it signs its own death warrant.

[109] CONCLUSION

I. Traditional Interpretation of Mental Characteristics

●181 In the introduction to Religion Bambara, Tauxier insists on the mental characteristics: "The Bambara has remained rather openly fetishist"; he possesses "two dominant traits, which are absolutely undisputed and indisputable:

"1. He is a very good farmer.

181 "2. The Bambara makes a solid and disciplined infantryman ... 142 Mentally he is rather dull and stupid, physically he is stocky and solid." Previously, the Abbé Henry had concluded in these terms: "The Bambara is a farmer ... Well proportioned, his height is medium, neither tall nor short. His chest is strong, and his short, thickset neck supports a large head covered with black, wooly hair. Nothing in his visage betokens spiritual force, energy, intelligence. His forehead is receding, his eyebrow arches are rather pronounced, and his jet-black eyes, of which the white part is slightly cream (!), are straight. His jaws, nearly always well toothed, project slightly; he has strong, thick lips, a short chin, cheekbones ... a little projecting, and his flat nose is horribly open and squashed at its root.

145 "The wife, as well as the husband, is strong, robust. More often than not she is knock-kneed, and this constitutional defect 182 doubtless comes from the fact that she is obliged, from her earliest childhood, to carry rather heavy burdens on her head, burdens often too heavy for her strength [sic]. Mentally, the Bambara has a mind 181 as thick as his body. Slow to understand and lacking curiosity, he has no desire to improve his condition. 'What my fathers did, I must do' -- that is his great principle ... Lazy, good-for-nothing even, he believes he's done everything if he has enough in his granary to feed himself and his family ... Timorous, he fears the European exactly as a slave fears his master, and if he serves the European passably well, the latter is greatly mistaken if he thinks he has gained the native's affection. He detests the White, as he detests the Moslem; the White is the conqueror, an anti-fetishist, and therefore an enemy."

Finally, M. Monteil, in his Monographie de Djenné [Djenné 142 Monograph], tells us in his turn: "... elongated skull and pronounced 302 prognathism; the black, wooly hair is often gathered in braids by the young people ... the top of the head is often shaven, which makes the forehead look larger. The women affect a sort of transversal crest.

142 "The forehead recedes, the eyebrow arches project ... the nose [110] flattened, the root of the nose squashed, the nostrils gaping wide, the lips thick ... the teeth wide with little space between ... the neck large, the shoulders wide and straight, the chest strong and long, the members robust, the joints thick. Rather often ... for the woman, sometimes for the man, a fairly pronounced steatopygia.

142 The skin is in all tints, from light maroon to dark black. The height is a little above average . . .

"The Bambara is a bumpkin; he is dull and slow to understand,
● 181 but he clings to his ideas, doubtless rare, and has an insurmountable stubbornness. He is patient; he endures every tyranny and submits to every calamity with a stupefying resignation. But when he has resolved to exact vengeance by force or by exercising his rights, nothing can stop him. He does not know how to present himself, he has trouble explaining himself, he always goes on interminably before coming to the point, and even though speaking deliberately, his eyes averted or fixed on the ground, he only pronounces half of the words, which makes it difficult to understand him."

These few extracts at least have the merit of giving a measure of the extent to which the Bambara is incomprehensible to the White.

II. Refutation of the Traditional Theory

The Bambara is, in fact, intelligent, patient, and stubborn, so many qualities indispensable for living in this difficult country. We have been able to show, in the course of this study, how coherent his metaphysical system was, its intellectual rigor, and how it influenced all social and economic life. But we must insist on this point: such a system is not the fruit of the idle speculations of a few privileged minds; it is lived by all, understood in its parts by all members of the society and in its totality by numerous old men.

153 The absence of a system of writing like our own obliges the
181 Bambara to possess all this knowledge himself, and his prodigious memory astonishes the White. But the most remarkable thing in his intellectual makeup is the facility with which he has managed to seize our modes of thought, so different from his traditional thought, and to assimilate our vision of the world; there is no great school in France that is not within his reach. The astonishing ease with which he is able to assimilate our language and our thought is adequate proof of the suppleness of his mind which has always been trained in all the speculative subtleties.

181 The stubbornness he exhibits in certain cases is often his only manner of defending his traditions, which are the very stuff of his life. These traditions were formed in the course of thousands of years of experience in a hard country where life is not a natural thing.

181 The upheavals caused by the colonization fascinate his curious soul, but their ultimate result is the uprooting and the destruction of the thing that permitted him to live and to defend himself against a harsh environment, the group. He defends himself against the White invasion by hiding; he prefers to appear stupid rather than to reveal [111] his system to the stranger and to confide to him what constitutes its force. The Bambara may seem lazy. In reality, he knows that agitation is impossible in this tropical climate; he is sparing in his movements in order to assure the maximum return from them. Moreover, moderation characterizes the whole of this sub-desert region. Never does any unconstraint develop generous forms; everything is condensed for maximum efficacity. The world is systematized into symbols which escape destruction. Exterior manifestations are useless in this country where the climate destroys everything. The only thing that resists is not matter, but spirit. The Bambara has systematically sacrificed all material luxury in favor of the speculative life, and his "averted eyes" are turned toward the inner life. It is perhaps because of that that he does not know how to "present" himself and that he doesn't sparkle like the Peul. He considers himself "a man of the soil," capable of enduring heat and cold and all the brutal changes that are visited on him by men or the elements. This is why he alone is able to render fecund a sterile land that has discouraged more than one of our technicians.

But what is perhaps the most important thing is the joy which fills the life of the Bambara. The women pound the cereals alone or in a group snapping their fingers in play; they spin cotton, sing, shout, laugh, cook, go seek dead wood in the bush, and draw water from the well or from a neighboring watercourse, all the while making waggish remarks on the small events of the day, for no detail escapes them. In the evening there are the Tam-tam, organized by the young people to celebrate a marriage, to thank a chief for his bounty, or for the simple pleasure of dancing, of losing oneself in the rhythm of the drums and rapid handclapping. At night, the Komo, surrounded by the dancers, comes to challenge a witch who terrorizes the village. A terrible fight ensues, with each one using his magic gifts. When the witch is vanquished, the village chief comes to felicitate the Komo chief publicly, and the women and and children gasp with pleasure. During a social evening, a griot

[8] gathers several friends in a corner to listen to songs and recitations of the old times; all are in ecstasy, moved, revolted or consoled, according to what happens in the long, marvelous story. Then, there are the games and challenges of the children's societies, which seem to want to upset all the fine social order of the village by their drum beatings, their petty thefts, or their claims.

To be sure, the life of the Bambara is exempt from neither work nor difficulties. But still it knows joy, goodwill, and peace. And if there is one thing that it does not know, that is, indubitably, boredom.

The Soul of an African People
The Bambara
Their Psychic, Ethical, Religious, and Social Life

/12/ Chapter 1

1. Beliefs Concerning the Forces of Nature

● 181 It would seem child's play to demonstrate to a Negro the absurdity of his prejudices and his superstitious practices; yet such a demonstration does not suceed. No matter how clear and simple your arguments may be, you will not succeed in bringing into his mind the least spark of light or the slightest doubt. The o do, "that's it," and tigné, "that's true," which spring so readily from the mouth of one whose eyes you try to open, are polite sayings, and nothing more.

There is no reason to be surprised. Being incapable of long meditation and broad reasoning, he does not grasp the illogicality of his beliefs and, the contradictions in his behavior; he believes what his fathers believed and, like them, he sacrifices, so that everything with which he comes in contact is reddened slightly with blood. Your talk at once surprises him and leaves him cold; he does not understand you or grasp what you say; he even finds you a little silly. If he does not dare to admit this feeling to himself he stops with the words: Toubabou do! (This is a white man! Can he think and judge as I myself judge?").

In addition, his beliefs are linked to one another, and if we are able to get down to his level, taking care all the while to raise him to ours, if we judge as he judges and think as he thinks, we will move from surprise to surprise, more than ever, for his conception of the world and ours are not at all the same, and his mentality and ours are different from each other.

181 811 772 Every non-Mohammedan Bambara considers himself a close relative of animals and plants and, I may add with all assurance /13/, a close relative of inanimate things. Without any doubt he distinguishes

181 811 772 the kingdoms from each other; for him a mineral is not a vegetable nor a vegetable an animal. He differentiates between the animate and the inanimate and does not confuse the genera and species. But has he known how to establish a definite, clear, and well-demarcated line of distinction between man and the rest of creation? No, he bases his ideas of all things on himself or, to be more definite, on what he feels and believes himself to be. In addition to genii and spirits, he sees conscious forces and energies everywhere in nature. He cannot define these forces; his ideas on the subject are confused and indefinite. But, nevertheless, it is true, that he attributes a glimmer of reason and feeling to everything. Obviously the black man does not attribute a soul -- in the sense that we understand it -- to everything; nor does he say that everything is the home of a genie or a spirit; yet he cannot conceive of pure matter. He finds instinct in animals and special virtues and properties in plants. In inert matter he encounters phenomena which he cannot explain, and since he always uses himself and his reasoning as the basis of comparisons, he endows everything with the immaterial, invisible, imperceptible attributes of reason and feeling. In his mind I repeat, matter is not a soul, or a genie as he conceives of one; yet it is a being, a force, a power that has its own existence and the ability to act of its own accord. Here are a few examples taken from a thousand:

811 731 782 825 In July, 1908 at the time when the crops were sprouting, certain regions of the Ségou circle were invaded by tiny caterpillars measuring barely 0.025 meters in length. They were a beautiful velvety black with pale green lines on their sides; they came from the east out of no one knows where and myriads of them proceeded toward the west in serried ranks. Wherever they passed everything was eaten, and the eleusine /African millet/, corn, and sorghum had to be resown.

While these creatures were devouring the crops, the Moslem cried his insignificant formula toward the east and repeated, "God is great." He prostrated himself, crouched on his heels, devoutly shaking his forefinger, but all was in vain, for the quivering black wave continued to draw back on itself, to hump its back, and then to grow longer /14/; it continued to advance and to grow. The pagan

772 -- Bambara sétané, Arabic chéitane شيطان -- are at open war with
776 Him; rooted in evil, powerful, and capable of harming and oppressing
177 human beings. They must nevertheless undergo eternal punishments in hell -- Bambara djahanéma /67/, Arabic djahannam جهنم -- in a fire compared to which, says the legend, ours would be only the little that would remain after seven consecutive washings with large quantities of water.

As this cursory glance indicates, both concept and words are strictly from the Koran. Can it be doubted that the Negro was taught all this by the Moslem? I have lived too long among the Negroes to take appearance for reality, and here once again I am wary of accepting the statements of our learned "travelers."

177 For centuries now, Islam has penetrated into the heart of Africa
181 and established itself in the midst of our Negro peoples; slow as its advance has been, it has not failed to leave its mark. The Bambara, the most important kernel of the Mande peoples, was always at war against the Moslem to safeguard his independence and the faith of his fathers (the wars were primarily religious). They were in turn conqueror and conquered, but most often conquered (for the Bambara, egoistic, plan their personal and individual interests before that of the group, and they always lacked cohesion and agreement, and never really had a leader at the top); they could not escape. Since they are nevertheless essentially deceitful, crafty, and hypocritical so that other peoples compare them to a piece of cow dung, dry outside but soft and loose inside so that it breaks and soils one as soon as a foot is placed on it -- and this comparison pleases them -- I do not hesitate to say that they took nothing from Islam that was not already in their minds. If they have taken Arabic terms to express themselves, I cannot doubt that this was purely diplomacy on their part. The use of Arabic terms that correspond to their own ideas in order to express their beliefs in present-day language represented adaptation and in no sense acceptance on their part. I would even assert that here they gave evidence, not of tact towards their conqueror (this is a quality which at the present time they do not possess even in an embryonic form), but of a certain pliability and shrewdness. In fact, by appearing before their tyrant on an equal footing with respect to dogma, they

177 avoided the stroke of the sword or slavery, kept their faith in fetishes
181 intact, and shielded both themselves and their /68/ children from all religious propaganda -- for what was there to teach them, what could they be taught that they did not know already?

177 The terms from the Koran have become familiar to them in
192 present-day language. Since they do not come from them and express primarily a concept rather than the thing itself, they have been able to use them with complete freedom, without failing in the respect due to the superior beings, their lords and gods, whose names are never spoken in vain or in an unsuitable name. Nowadays the words have become so Bambara that the people do not even suspect that they are foreign to their language, and have no cause to be surprised at them. The Bambara make anything their own that they feel translates their thought precisely, without giving much attention to the original meaning of the word, which they often do not know. Having
[576] heard the Moslem repeatedly cry out bismilahi, they thought it in good taste to make this exclamation in the anecdotes and stories that they tell, and for two or three years this has been the super-polite expression in "smart" society for inviting a guest to enter a hut and squat on the mat. In twenty years this word bismilahi بسم الله will have no other meaning! Even though it means "in the name of God," you would be laughed at if you were heard to say that it is an Arabic word with quite another meaning, just as you would waste your time telling a Negro that the expression "fou moi le camp" /"get out of here," literally "give me the camp."/ is plain /French/ slang. When a slave escapes, does one not say, "a bi fou moi (1) le camp?"

1. a: "he," bi: "is," fou moi le camp; the whole expression: "to desert."

It is a widely used expression known by everyone and is teamed with this other: ze ma fo, about which I pondered for several days, seeking to find its meaning. Yet nothing could be simpler; it is "I don't give a rap." /From the French je m'en fous/.

771 If the Bambara have fought to safeguard their independence,
●181 they have done so primarily to preserve their faith and keep their fetishes. They have shown such great attachment for these, that their
[101] conquerors have described them as rebels and applied to them the epithet Bamba, synonym of Kafri. These religious struggles in themselves allow us to state as an indisputable fact that before the arrival of the Moslems the Bambara were animistic and sacrificed to genii. /69/

776 Did they have an exact and precise idea of their genii as they
811 do now? Apparently yes, for they always reasoned using themselves as a basis of comparison so that in their minds the invisible, impalpable genii to whom they sacrificed had a striking resemblance to man. It is not a man, and yet it is one, they say unable to define their concept or idea, ma si fa do (1).

1. Ma; "man"; si fa' "certain kind"; do; "it is."

776 The Moslem word djin translates this idea precisely, and the
782 Bambara use it in everyday language; but when the day of the sacrifice comes, they become unaware of it and there remains only one word -- ma, meaning "man." When they redden with blood the bark of
[824] the baobab (Adansonia digitata), the tamarind tree, the false cedar (family of the cedrelaceae), etc., to obtain the good graces and protection of the genie who dwells there, they always confer on it the title ma ("man"), and never that of djiné. "Ma n'zira ba, ma n'tomi ba, ma djala ba; O great baobab man, O great tamarind tree man, O great false-cedar man!" begins the formula used by the sacrificer in offering victims and millet flour to the genie (2). They also have

114 2. In /J. Henry/, "Culte des esprits chez les Bambara /Spirit Worship among the Bambara/," Anthropos, Vol. III, No. 4 (1908), p. 1 /p. 702/, note 1, there is an error in translation.

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this boli from the belt and hanging
it at the side along the thigh.

three most famous sorcerers, whose names -- Makono, Tjewolo, and Tjéba -- have been preserved, but whose origin is lost in the dark of ages, sacrificed to it by preference. This is the formula:

"Touafé Bla, Touafé Bla, the mountain of Touafé Bla is known, the trees of this mountain are known, I want to speak of the fire of its mountain. Touafé Bla, spare some houses (meaning: 'those of my friends') and go and kindle (your fire) in others (meaning: 'cast ruin and desolation among my enemies, among those who wish me ill'). Touafé Bla, favor me, and if I cannot see your fire, Touafé Bla, let me at least see the tip of its long column of smoke (meaning: 'you live in the fire; I cannot see your dwelling, but I can still know your power through the smoke of your fire, that is to say, /I shall know it/ if I am a witness of the misfortunes which you will cause to fall on my enemies and those whom I hate')." /73/

This formula shows us clearly that the boli, or gnâ, live in fire. The Negroes sacrificed to them before the arrival of the Moslems, and gave concrete form to their concept of the infernal spirit, just as they do today, by decking themselves out in a hideous horned mask and a cloak of feathers. Their blowing and shouting in the sacred woods on the days of great orgies have remained the same, and al-
[192] though they have taken the words sétané شيطان and djahanéma جهنم from the Moslems, they have had the concept for a long time.

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Now then, as to the Bambaras' knowledge of the Supreme Being, God the Creator and Ruler, Lord of all, do they owe it to the Moslems?

The Bambara have too hierarchical a nature to need a master here! The youngest child is always the slave of the next older brother, who is the slave of an older one, and so the progression moves up invariably without ever changing, to the grey beard, the elder, the tjekoroba, a real fetish whom everyone obeys, whatever his stupidity, his narrowness of mind, or his lack of judgment.

In every family there is the same progression: the immediate lord of the children is their father, while he in turn bows before his

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776 elders; and above them, as undisputed lord, soars the eldest, the
181 gouatigi, or head of the family.

All the gouatigi are subject to heads of quarters, led by the
776 dougoutigi, (1) or village heads; these obey the kafotigi, or heads of
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1. The dougoutigi, or religious head of the village, takes precedence over the sotigi, or civil head. I believe that since the time of Carrier, administrator of the circle in 1901, this hierarchy as such has been officially done away with. It persists nevertheless, and the kafotigi and fama déou, priestly in character, secretly retain their prestige.

the canton, who in turn are governed by the fama déou, sons of the king or ministers. Such was the original organization of the Bambara, and all these petty chiefs, were absolute and uncontested lords, each in his own sphere.

776 Above them all there was the king, Fama or Massa (2), whose
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2. The word Massa, used to designate the king, also means "great and powerful sorcerer." In the beginning the king really had absolute power, both civil and religious, and was really the prince or pope of fetishism. If he were not, would he have been given the title of Massa, "great priest," "great sorcerer?"

chief function was to allow himself to live in affluence and /74/ sweet idleness. He held all his subjects in his hands; all were his slaves, from the least to the highest, and he had the power of life and death over each and every one.

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181 Before the arrival of the Moslem, the Bambara sacrificed to the gnéna, otherwise known as djiné, and to the gnâ, or sétané; and all these genii, whatever name one is pleased to call them, were arranged in a hierarchy as they are today. They were all divided into groups, each with its head, and these heads in turn formed other groups governed by a more powerful one. And if we conclude that the Bambara owes the concept of this hierarchy to the Moslem, would we not be saying that the latter pulled his sword from its sheath in order to strengthen the Negro in his fetishism? Would not we be admitting that he betrayed the Koran which commands him to destroy idolatry: "... kill them /idolators/ wheresoever you shall find them, and take them prisoners, and besiege them, and lay wait for them in every convenient place." (1) All the evidence permits us to say that this hierarchy in

1. Koran: chap. IX, v. 5.

the world of invisible beings comes from the Bambara themselves! How then can we believe that they stopped half-way, they who are always grouping and dividing? Is it possible that they did not attain the idea of the autocrat, the unparalleled one, God the sovereign Lord of the genii and sovereign Lord of the beings beneath them, of men and the rest of creation?

And when I study the Bambara hierarchy, I become aware that it is primarily religious! The gouatigi, or head of the family, is a priest; the Fama or Massa, the king, is a priest! Recognition of the genii and of the Creator must thus necessarily have preceded it.

Consequently, there is every reason to believe, not only that the Bambara had the idea of an only God, sovereign Lord of all before the arrival of the Moslems, but that this was their first belief.

776 In the mouth of a Bambara the word God has not nearly the breadth of meaning that we give it. They believe that although He sees all, knows all, and exercises His power everywhere, He is not really everywhere, for powerful, great, and immeasurable as He may be, He remains a "Being" which has quantity and dimensions; /75/ He is circumscribed and occupies space. From here the idea of good angels is only a step, and how easy it is for them to make it.

778 791 The Bambara consult these sorcerers to find out the future and to draw their horoscopes or good luck. The fee for a seance is not at all unreasonable; it seldom exceeds the moderate sum of 40 cowrie shells, or one sou.

Concerning the Sirikoun

778 754 Every great boli includes an object called sirikoun. There are other sirikoun which are no longer parts of boli, but have become actual boli. The latter are hung at the waist and are always /156/ covered with a red cloth. Almost everyone owns them, although they are most frequently in the hands of the owners and sacrificers of great fetishes. They are usually ends of the tails of cows, horses, wild pigs, etc., and are often sprinkled with blood. They are sought in order to cast a spell or sorcery on an enemy, to make him sick, and even [151] cause him to die, or again to protect oneself from a spell, sorcery, sickness, or death.

The sirikoun and the talking boli are fetishes belonging to individuals; they have neither festivals nor formal sacrifices, and they are not publically worshipped.

Chapter 8

The First Years in the Life of a Bambara

1. The Sexual Morality of the Bambara

• 181 Those who have seen the Bambara and have the slightest acquaintance with them will not hesitate to tell you: "They are liars and thieves." They certainly never pass up a chance to take the property of another, and they lie boldly and with such complete calm that not a muscle in their bodies flinches. This has always surprised

me, and it seems to me that the Bambara might describe himself as: "A man sufficiently master of himself to be able always to agree with you without ever revealing his inner thoughts."

Their character is not made up entirely of vices, however, and I have been told by earnest men that the Bambara never, at least in public, practice those familiarities with women which shock and wound every person of high principles. They have added that the two crimes of adultery and fornication are unusual with them, and this, one may be sure, is less on account of the severe penalties which they incur (it seems that before the French conquest the punishment was death without reprieve), than because they are without feelings, that is, strong passions. Their women can without any difficulty go around with bare bosoms, breasts exposed, hips girded with a paltry rag knotted under the navel, and their young girls are satisfied with their small strip of cloth, three fingers wide, which is knotted in front at the waist, slides between the legs, and is caught up in back by the cord, to fall in a long train decorated by a gorgeous pompon the size of a fist. They did not tell me, of course, but /158/ they gave me to understand quite well that if it were absolutely necessary the girls could without blushing go around in the scant garb of children who roll in the dust dressed as on the day they were born, quite naked. Nakedness cannot stir a Negro; beauty does not excite his eyes, for he does not have the feeling for it. And for a long time I believed the Bambara to be endowed with an angelic nature.

All these beautiful thoughts have left me, and I must admit that the Bambara are hideously degraded! Every day has made the matter clearer to me, for when I have left the mission to go to the surrounding villages, as the duties of my office oblige me to do several times a week, I have seen the same scenes again and again, heard the same songs and the same conversations, and I have found nothing very angelic in any of them. If I went into a field, I saw young men bent over their hoes, backs running with sweat, who got up and jumped, shouted the most raucous "you you," and made an obscene gesture. If a little girl, a child, came to give them a jug of cool water, she would get a coarse word as thanks and payment, and often, not to say almost always, a rough hand would remind her

181 that she is a girl, that one day she will be a man's plaything, an
831 object for his pleasure. The child would leave smiling and replace
her three fingers of rag even as she walked away. At dinner time a
[482] big girl would come carrying the gourd of tô, or sorghum gruel, on
her head, and on the palm of her right hand, at shoulder height, the
platter of dried fish sauce. She would be greeted from as far away
as she could be seen and asked for a report on her whole body, and
indeed there would be no stopping at "how are your feet" nor even at
"how are your breasts." And the girl would answer all these vile questions
without getting excited, and when a well-washed hand, ready to
be used as a spoon, embraced her or lifted her breasts, she was not
shocked; only the opposite would surprise her.

887 Here and there in the village a giant tree stretches its branches
538 afar, and the old men, lovers of endless palaver, enjoy themselves
521 under its shade. They go there from the early morning to weave cloth,
make mats, tan hides, scour goats' horns intended for powerful
amulets, etc., and often even /159/ just for the purpose of spending
the hours dozing. And in the midst of all these gray, or at least
graying, beards, swarms a world of children. Among the old men
there are good storytellers /conteur/, who excel in stories of hunting
and war that throb with interest -- but why, alas, must they always
graft on some salacious incident? Their mouths are full chiefly with
[831] stories of adultery and fornication. They will not spare you a single
detail, and they will readily go back to the very beginning so as to
lack no precision whatever. And the moral of these stories can be
reduced to this: "There is nothing in this world comparable to the
pleasures of the flesh; let us enjoy marriage and never pass up a chance
to obtain this satisfaction."

521 If the old men are this lewd, is it surprising to hear the young
831 men describe the ugliness of their bestial evenings while they make
864 mats, stretch the hides of drums, or sew a blouse, a cap, or trousers
for themselves in the b'lon, or entry hut? They talk constantly of their
soungourou, and this term, which should simply mean an unmarried
girl, means any woman, married or not, who gives herself to the
first comer.

Without any shame they talk and chat about all these vile acts
before their little brothers, before children ten and twelve years old,